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¡Ask a Mexican!
Orange County: A Personal History

TACO USA

How Mexican Food Conquered America

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Scribner
New York London Toronto Sydney New Delhi

2012

Chapter One

You Mean Mexico Gave the World More Than Just Tacos?

Before we begin our study of Mexican food in the United States, it's wise to start at the source: Mexico. Trying to figure out who created what dish or harvested what crop first is a silly exercise, but there is an acknowledged Bethlehem, where foreigners first became entranced by the food and then sought to sing its glories ever after: Mexico City.

The mother in this Nativity scene, of course, is the Virgin of Guadalupe, whom the Catholic Church says appeared to the peon Juan Diego in 1531 as a brown-skinned Mother of Christ dressed in the simple shawl of an Aztec maiden pregnant with child. It was this mestizo Mary, this exercise in syncretism, that seared herself on the apron of the Indian Juan Diego so he might show it to disbelieving Spanish priests as proof of Her message: that the newly conquered Aztecs and other tribes were worthy of mercy. Millions of pilgrims visit that *tilma*, kept at the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe, early in the morning of every December 12 in a ceremony broadcast around the world and reenacted at parishes across the United States. Although Roman Catholic in veneration, Guadalupe is uniquely Mexican, embraced by a nation that finds redemption in her swarthy gaze and the promise of

salvation by the good works involved in consuming steaming tamales and Mexican hot chocolate customary after Her Mass.

But if *la gudalupana* is the mother, Her son is far less beloved. A statue of Christ sits dejectedly about five miles away from the basilica, inside the St. Joseph Chapel of the Metropolitan Cathedral of the Assumption of Mary of Mexico City. It's near the former location of the Templo Mayor, a towering achievement of Aztec architecture, a shrine to the two saints that best personified their dual outlooks on life: Huitzilpochtli, the god of war, and Tlaloc, the god of water. The Spaniards leveled this Brobdingnagian pyramid shortly after possessing Tenochtitlán, and used its massive stones to erect the cathedral. Syncretism.

Christ of the Cacao, at the Metropolitan Cathedral of the Assumption of Mary in Mexico City. Mexicans have left cacao beans at the statue's feet as alms for centuries, a show of the power Mexican food immediately had on culinary neophytes. (Photo by Daniel Hernandez)



During the cathedral's construction in the 1700s, Christ appeared to the Aztecs' descendants in the form of El Señor del Cacao—Christ of the Cacao, a life-sized statue. Whereas Guadalupe offered emancipation from this vale of tears, this was the Christ of defeat. It's this Christ who is alone in the cathedral's St. Joseph Chapel, the God accessible to the

touch of the public unlike heavenly Guadalupe, who towers over Her children at the basilica, encased in glass. He sits slumped, head resting on His fist, elbow on knee, ribs poking out of pallid skin. The Nazarene wears a crown of thorns, but that isn't what pains Him the most. In His other hand, Jesus holds the branch of a cacao tree, the plant whose fruit gives us chocolate. The Catholic Church had noted that the Aztecs paid tribute to their gods at the Templo Mayor with cacao beans, so they replaced the statues of those deities with theirs—but allowed believers to keep leaving their deistic gifts, now calling them alms toward the cathedral's construction.

People continue to venerate the statue, although they now tend to leave pesos and caramel candies between the Christ of the Cacao's grimy feet instead of actual cacao—the beans themselves, which grow in the wild and on plantations just hours away from Mexico City, are far too valuable to waste on penance. But the idea of taking the food of pilgrims is the cross that the statue bears. For while the Spanish Empire subjugated the land, its explorers also discovered foodstuffs that they shipped back to Europe and across the world, items the world soon turned into global products, items whose origins and journey to our tables we take for granted today. Some, such as amaranth and turkey, had only minimal impact on the world's eating customs; others, such as tomatoes, corn, and chile peppers, found lives outside the Mexican diet and came to define other cuisines. And then there's the two filched foods: vanilla and chocolate, indisputably Mexican, beloved by almost all, creators of fortunes for nearly everyone but their motherland.

The Christ of the Cacao weeps. The world feasts. Yum.

Accurate accounts of the first encounters between the Spaniards and the various natives they met upon landing in what's now Mexico are notoriously difficult to ascertain: readers must take contemporary accounts such as Hernán Cortés's letters to King Charles V, and his soldier Ber-

nal Díaz del Castillo's *The Discovery and Conquest of Mexico*, as biased apologies for their actions, while Aztec dialogues and codices written years after the Conquest under the careful eyes of Spanish priests serve better as anthropological curiosities than truthful dialogues. Nevertheless, one of the consistent themes that emerge from the various tellings of the tale is that the Spaniards fast became enamored with the various, never-before-seen foods that appeared before them nearly daily during their expeditions, a template that prefigured and predicted the American devotion to Mexican food by centuries.

We do know the first time Europeans enjoyed a Mexican lunch, however. In early 1517, a group of Spaniards stationed in Cuba convinced the governor of the territory to let them sail to the lands west of the island. Led by Francisco Hernández de Córdoba, the expedition brought with them for the journey bacon, salted beef, and bread made from cassava, a New World tuber that the Spanish explorers had already incorporated into their diet. Upon reaching what's now the tourist hideaway of Cozumel (just off the coast of the Yucatán), according to Bartolomé de las Casas's *Historia de las Indias (History of the Indies)*, a group of Maya on ten canoes approached the strangers, boarded their boat, and offered water and snacks. They were made from corn, an item the Spaniards had already tasted, but the Maya produced their food in a way unfamiliar to the explorers: in a type of gruel made from maize that was probably a form of masa, the cornmeal that has served as the linchpin of the Meso-American diet for millennia. Córdoba's men reciprocated by giving the Indians beads and a cotton shirt.

The Maya asked the Spaniards to allow a Cuban Indian who accompanied the expedition to travel with them to the mainland, to transport food back for the ship; the Spaniards agreed, and some even joined the Maya. That night, though, two natives approached the sleeping Spaniards with bows and arrows; the frightened Spaniards slew them. In the standoff, as a peace offering, the Indians brought the Spaniards gold and bread and what was most likely two roasted *guajolotes*: turkeys.¹

It was all a ruse: the Maya ambushed the Spaniards, and the bat-

tered Córdoba expedition returned to Cuba. They returned the following spring under the command of Juan de Grijalva, armed with more men and a taste for the new food. In a break during fighting, the troops hunted and ate rabbits and deer; upon approaching a friendly village, according to Castillo, they offered beads in return so that villagers "might bring us some food and poultry." On the return home, Grijalva's ship needed repairs; locals fed them "with great goodwill."²

Cortés was the next Spaniard to take on Mexico, leaving Cuba with eleven ships and about five hundred men early in 1519. News of the Spaniards' arrival in Mexico reached Moctezuma II, the emperor of the Aztecs. He had lived a life of gluttony up to that point, a daily cycle of feasts and banquets that his advisers warned was insulting to the spartan ways of their ancestors and was leaving His Highness susceptible to softness, a quality unbecoming of the emperor of such a vast, volatile kingdom. Something world-changing was on its way to Tenochtitlán—the Aztecs knew it, but not what or who. Maybe gods, per the claim by the Spanish chroniclers, who pointed out that Cortés arrived the year Aztec chroniclers had pegged as the reappearance of Quetzalcoatl, a light-skinned, bearded god who had left his faithful centuries ago but had promised to return. Maybe worse.

Food became one of the primary tests the Spaniards and the Aztecs used on each other to determine if the other side was amigo or foe. Moctezuma had emissaries greet Cortés along the way with meals that his advisers insisted revealed upon their eating whether the coming swarm were deities or demons: turkey, turkey eggs, tortillas, and comestibles covered in human blood, the latter of which left Cortés and his men retching and fearful of what lies ahead in their long march. Another account maintains that a commoner made his way from the coast of the Gulf of Mexico to Tenochtitlán to alert the emperor of these strange white men who had landed on the coast. The messenger brought with him biscuits, bacon, and dried beef given to him by the Spaniards; he had eaten some, but left most of it for the emperor. The awestruck Moctezuma refused to eat "under the pretext they were

exquisite foods of the gods," instead having a coterie of hunchbacks taste the gifts; they reported the biscuit was "sweet and soft."³ Afterward, Moctezuma placed the exotic meals in pots and had the food burned.

Along the way, the Spaniards found allies among tribes who had long paid tribute to the Aztecs with their unique crops: chiles, squash, fruits, cocoa beans, and other delights the Spanish also learned to enjoy. Together the alliance reached Tenochtitlán, the Aztec capital, and the site of modern-day Mexico City. It was one of the world's great metropolises at the time, famously compared to Venice by royal chroniclers, and its carnival of food wowed the Spaniards almost as much as Tenochtitlán's architecture or geography. The city's main market in the Tlateloco district saw daily crowds upward of sixty thousand walking around stalls stocked with so much variety—fish from the Gulf of Mexico and the Pacific, vegetables from Guatemala and points north, insects and game from the desert, from the jungles, from the mountains, and seemingly all points of the known world—that Bernal Díaz del Castillo remarked, "I could never finish naming them, and so will leave them."⁴

The Aztecs, like the Spaniards, were conquistadors themselves, coming from the northern regions of modern-day Mexico and settling into the Valley of Mexico in the 1300s. As the Aztecs battled their way to the top, food became part of the spoils of war. As newcomers to the region, they originally foraged from the swamps—fish, tadpoles, grub. Maize and chilies would have been the only foodstuffs with which they had any familiarity; chocolate and vanilla were aspirations, items reserved only for the wealthier tribes—and even then, limited to the upper classes of their societies. Regardless of provenance or position in the Valley of Mexico's hierarchy, almost all foodstuffs made it into one of two primary vessels: the tortilla, a flat disk made from masa, or the tamale, a more substantial bulk of cornmeal stuffed with an ingredient, then steamed and wrapped in a corn husk. The tortilla never went beyond Mexico and parts of Central America, but the tamale found a

home from northern Mexico to Chile and Argentina. Its simple status belies its remarkable nature: they keep for days. They're nutritious. They can get carried, distributed, and eaten easily—the ultimate movable feast.

Together, tortillas and tamales transfixed the Spaniards. Díaz's prose turned purple at the descriptions of the feasts Moctezuma held in honor of Cortés's arrival, with the ruler's cooks preparing a banquet that played to their master's gourmand tendencies, the tendencies his advisers had warned were leaving him weak. The chronicler described "more than thirty styles of dishes made according to their fashion and usage," and more than a thousand meals for just one sitting.⁵ But the soldiers' amazement at the gastronomic bounties of their hosts faded as they realized this fountain of wealth was in disarray, and the Spaniards took Moctezuma captive. A full accounting of the conquest of Mexico isn't germane to this discussion, except for one final anecdote: as part of Moctezuma's peaceful surrender, Cortés demanded that his court supply the conquistadors with native food, which they had grown to enjoy. Moctezuma complied, and his supporters "were angry with the king and no longer revered or respected him." But they did as they were told.⁶

The appropriation of Mexican food had begun.

Mexico underwent the convulsions that occur when one people supplant another, mixing yet keeping distinct identities. The Spaniards incorporated tamales, tortillas, and other ingredients into their daily lives; in return, they introduced bread along with beef, lamb, pork, and chickens, and other flora and fauna that profoundly changed the Mexican diet. The Spaniards also brought along distillation, which allowed the creation of new alcoholic drinks based on the maguey, the slow-growing plant the Aztecs used to intoxicate themselves. Cows introduced milk and cheese.

Instead of fully embracing two-way fusion, however, Mexico's new rulers tried to wean the indigenous off the tortilla and tamale diet and hook them on wheat. Bernardino de Sahagún, the Franciscan

friar whose ethnographies of the Aztecs remain one of the most thorough resources on them, urged his readers to eat wheat, "that which the Castilian people eat because it is good food, that with which they are raised, they are strong and pure and wise . . . you will become the same way if you eat their food."⁷ The natives, however, wouldn't have it, complaining that it tasted like famine food. What the Spaniards hadn't yet realized was the marvel the natives enacted each day when creating masa, the corn dough made by women after treating freshly picked kernels through one of the more serendipitous culinary innovations in human history: nixtamalization. It's one of those food-chemistry wonders that, like fish sauce or sauerkraut, is a testament to the human capacity to let food rot in the quest to create a tastier product—and in this case, unleashing a modest food's full potential.

Although maize traces its genetic roots to Mexico, natives had already cultivated the crop across the Caribbean and North America by the time Columbus reached Hispaniola. It was the centerpiece of the diet for most of Mexico's indigenous, one filled with mystery and ceremony—but consistently eating it raw is potentially deadly due to corn's lack of niacin, which leads to pellagra, a wasting disease. Somewhere in the past, some genius tinkered around with corn and discovered the process that removed the danger of pellagra by introducing niacin. The method, then as now, is as follows: after harvest, dried maize kernels are soaked in an alkaline solution made of lime and ash, poisonous on its own yet amazingly not contaminous to the maize. The kernels steep in the liquid for the day; that step loosens the kernel's husk and absorbs the many minerals (calcium, potassium, zinc, niacin, and others) created in the alkaline solution unavailable by eating raw corn. The kernels become easier to grind, but the chemical reaction also adds a component to the eventual masa that allows it to keep a firmness necessary for the plying and flipping and stretching to come. The technique improves the flavor and aroma of the meal as well, and reduces the toxins in corn that induce pellagra.

Nixtamalization allowed its practitioners to subsist on an almost

all-corn diet since time immemorial. The Spaniards tried their darndest to eradicate the old ways, but no threats of punishment, no promises of evolution ever decimated the tortilla and tamale's hold on Mexicans. Nixtamalization was never exported to the world like nearly all the rest of Mexico's bounty. No, there'd be other things to get rich off of.

If you can't travel to Papantla, a gorgeous municipality on the Gulf of Mexico, a land of jungles, white-sand beaches, and architecture featuring a clash of colonial and indigenous, then go on YouTube. Typing in the city's name will bring up numerous videos of *voladores*—fliers.

Here's one. Five men sweat under the humid heat of Papantla. Clothing covers everything but their faces and hands; stockings stretch over bright-red pants; a festooned tunic covers their chest; from it peeks a long-sleeved, chalk-white shirt. Topping each hombre is a skullcap decorated with flowers, crowned with a miniature, multicolored crest that, in a flash, looks like a midget rainbow Mohawk.

They are Totonacs, an ethnic group that predates the Aztecs and Maya, long ridiculed across Mexico for their backward ways except for one trait: they are the last practitioners of *la danza de los voladores*, the dance of the fliers, crowned an intangible cultural heritage by UNESCO to save the pageant from extinction. It's a dance as splendid as the costumed men: they first find a tree about a hundred feet tall, which they chop down and form into a smooth pole, thanking the tree for honoring them with its utility. The pole is raised in a public square and secured to the ground—this is where the *danza* will occur. But before any acrobatics, the men perform a ceremony: the quintet circles the wooden beam while each dancer twirls in an individual trance. One plays a high-pitched plea on a flute while keeping time with a tiny drum.

The five men ascend the pole, climbing up planks nailed from the base to the summit, and sit on four longer planks connected together so they form a rickety square that rotates; the flute player stands on top of

the pole. Each ties a rope around his waist to his section of the square. After a bit of meditation, the *danzantes* hang off the square, give themselves a quick spin, and fling into the air. The square rotates; the centrifugal force that is four men throwing themselves simultaneously into the sky keeps each dancer upside down at a tight forty-five-degree angle instead of dropping like dead weight. The crowd gasps. The flute player continues his piercing song, sitting on the tiny top of the pole without any rigging to keep him from falling, as the dancers slowly descend, twisting and twirling. Flying. It's studied for years before its practitioners attempt the dance, traditionally practiced only by men.

The *voladores* finally returned to earth, flipping themselves onto their feet just as their heads are about to slam into the ground, and emerge unscathed. The crowd applauds. The color, the spectacle, the beauty: it's the diametrical opposite of the adjectival tense of the Totonacs' greatest contribution to the world: vanilla.

From the verdant valleys of Papantla and its surrounding regions in what's now the Mexican state of Veracruz, the Totonacs have harvested the orchid that produces the vanilla bean for generations. Upon subjugating the Totonacs, the Aztecs demanded the group pay tribute to them via the beans, which found their fragrant way into their drinks—but the secret of domesticating the orchids by manual pollination stayed with the Totonacs. The relationship was exploitative enough that the tribe gladly aligned with the Spaniards to take down the Aztecs—the Totonacs were the first to pledge allegiance to Cortés, the first to treat them to a steady supply of Mexican food.

Vanilla arrived in Europe shortly after the Conquest, specifically as a flavoring agent for the chocolate that the Spaniards were already imbibing, as a drink, in large quantities. Through the royal courts, the vine took hold in France, where the House of Bourbon prized vanilla for its scent. The demand increased enough that small vanilla plantations existed by the eighteenth century from Veracruz to northern Guatemala—but how to pollinate the plants and thus make a profitable industry out of harvesting vanilla remained with the Toton-

acs, who worked the fields. Scientists, investors, traders, and others vainly attempted to decipher the pollination puzzle, going as far as to bribe the Totonacs and even spy on their methods. But still, the secret remained intact, and the Veracruz area continued as the center for the vanilla trade, Papantla its main port of commerce.

The Totonacs didn't get rich off of their homegrown industry, of course: they were Indians. It was fitting, in a karmic way, that another slave finally discovered how to manually pollinate the vanilla orchard: Edmond Albius, a native of the tiny island of Réunion, east of Madagascar, in 1841. Belgian professor Charles Morren had actually discovered his own way to hand-pollinate vanilla and even published a paper on his findings in 1838, but his version was too complicated. Albius, while tending the garden of his master, decided to try to pollinate the vanilla flower the same way he pollinated the other orchids in the garden. He grabbed—depending on which retelling you trust—a blade of grass, a toothpick, or a bamboo splinter, to separate a flap on the flower. With his other hand, Albius dabbed pollen from the vanilla flower on his finger, then smeared it on the stigma of the plant. This step, so fiendishly simple, remains the most common way to manually pollinate the plant.

By that point, vanilla bloomed around the tropical colonies of Europe, but growers had to rely on natural pollination to have the orchids produce the mystical beans, which didn't always result in reliable harvests. The procedure revolutionized vanilla production, and the French soon introduced plantations to Madagascar, Tahiti, and its other territorial holdings. Albius gained his freedom only after France outlawed slavery in its colonial holdings, and died poor; nearly a century after his death, Albius's hometown of Sainte-Suzanne finally erected a monument in his honor. Meanwhile, Frenchmen cornered the world vanilla market.

Back in the United States at about the same time as Albius's breakthrough, Boston chemist Joseph Burnett took on a challenge issued by a customer: was there any way to make vanilla flavoring like what was

sold in France? Burnett, so his company's history states, bought some beans and tinkered with a recipe for a couple of years before finally inventing vanilla extract in 1850. The synthesized results introduced vanilla's flavor on a mass scale to American home cooking, and the secret of the Totonacs was breached again. "The world-famous ruby mines of Burmah [*sic*] have scarcely been more jealously guarded, more surrounded by mystery and commercial interest, than has the Valley of Mazantla, classical home of the remarkable orchid known as Vanilla," began the introduction to *About Vanilla*, the fiftieth-anniversary book of the Joseph Burnett Company published in 1900. Its cover featured the Pico de Orizaba, the eighteen-thousand-foot mountaintop considered sacred by the Totonacs that towers over most of Veracruz's vanilla-growing region.⁸

Totonacs still harvest vanilla in their native lands, but the bean's cultivation is in some ways more endangered than the dance of the fliers. Madagascar is now the premier grower of the crop, while Mexico contributes only a couple of tons to the world's harvest each year. The vanilla of Veracruz no longer has the mystical cachet it once possessed; now the world desires vanilla from Tahiti, from Madagascar, from anywhere but Mexico. Deforestation of its native region has contributed to the plant's native collapse, along with immigration to the United States of Veracruzans who can no longer subsist on the orchid that once brought them meaning and life.

There's a chocolate museum in Canada, nearly a dozen in France, and even one in Estonia. Hershey's keeps a public repository of its history, as does Cadbury in England, Germany's Ritter Sport, and the Perugina brand of Italy. Nestlé keeps two, in Switzerland and Mexico City. But the world's premier exhibition on chocolate is Choco-Story: The Chocolate Museum, in a fifteenth-century-era four-story building in Brussels, Belgium. The Belgian confectionary concern Belcolade underwrites the project, but it's impressively objective in recounting

chocolate's past, present, and future via exhibits that range from computer screens and artifacts to mannequins dressed as conquistadors standing on a minigalleon and appearing ready to pounce off and rush onward toward empire. They have a second museum, in Prague, and organize chocolate festivals across Europe, but Brussels is the place to visit: four floors of chocolate madness—and it's expanding.

Choco-Story is hardly a pretentious place, but it's far removed in presentation and monetary investment from the drinkable museum offered by the people behind the Academia Semillas del Pueblo Xincalmecac (Seeds of the People Academy), a charter school in the working-class El Sereno neighborhood of Los Angeles. Pupils learn English and Spanish, but also Mandarin Chinese and Nahuatl, along with Mayan concepts of mathematics in addition to the reading, writing, and arithmetic of public education. It's a brave experiment in self-sustainability, and one that's working—a high school is in the works to continue Semillas del Pueblo's work, and they operate Xocolatl Café, a coffee shop where they're trying to return mankind to the original chocolate, the elixir of Moctezuma's court, to save the sweet treat from what its popularity has wrought upon itself.

It's almost too quixotic a venture, given modern-day chocolate's multibillion-dollar, worldwide stranglehold on the cocoa industry. But you haven't tried chocolate until you try Xocolatl's version—and if you're a guest of Semillas principal Marcos Aguilar, a tall, slender man with jet-black hair slicked back and tied into a ponytail that hangs down to his back, you will.

Even if he's in a pinstriped suit, BlackBerry constantly pinging new alerts, Aguilar will whip up the old-school drink. He'll grab cocoa paste, untreated and without sugar, and place it in a metal container, pouring boiling water spiked with chile on top of it. In goes a jigger of aguamiel, the sap of the maguey plant that, in another incarnation, serves as the base for the ancient alcoholic beverage pulque. Then comes the whisking: immediately furious, yet increasing in intensity as every second adds up into two minutes. Aguilar pours the chocolate

into a clay mug and places it on the table. His eyes are penetrating but kind as he waits for you to sip.

The first feature of Aguilar's hot chocolate that tweaks the senses is the foam: unadulterated cocoa butter, velvety and invigorating. Candy-makers discard most of the cocoa butter when producing their chocolate bars, so to taste gobs of the stuff is akin to capturing the mythical angel's share of distilled alcohol, the portion of every barrel that naturally evaporates. Next comes the watery sweetness of the aguamiel, followed by the chile water's subtle kick. Chocolate seems almost an afterthought in this drink, but only because the modern human palate is accustomed to Snickers and Kisses and virtually every cocoa concoction except its rawest, purest, most intoxicating form. The postprandial buzz makes a double-shot espresso seem as jolting as a droplet of water.

"The world needs to remember this drink," Aguilar says, with the conviction of a bodhisattva who has just experienced nirvana but won't be content until everyone has. "The world *will* know this drink."

How chocolate became a global sweet is oft told, and is perhaps the most chronicled segment of Mexican culinary history, one too broad to properly cover in this volume. What does need recounting for our purposes, however, are those early years of exposure, to document again the power Mexican food has to turn skeptical, outright hostile foreigners into zombies to the taste.

Botanists place cacao's genesis somewhere in South America, and it migrated northward to find its most fruitful roots around Guatemala, El Salvador, and the sylvan highlands of southern Mexico. The Mayans first elevated cacao as something holy and revelatory; ruins show how they roasted, cracked, and deshelled cocoa beans until what was left of the bean was a smoky, bitter part called the nib. These nibs were ground into a paste, then placed into a pot upon which preparers slushed boiling water. They poured the cocoa water from one pot to another until the liquid foamed, and finished the drink with chilies, aguamiel, vanilla, and other aromatics. Only the upper classes enjoyed this beverage, and only on special occasions, a ceremony that

migrated into Tenochtitlán. The Aztecs imported the cocoa beans and their exalted role from those Mayan regions, expanding those eligible to taste it to warriors who distinguished themselves in battle. The drink became so valued that cocoa beans became a type of currency, a way for commoners and the conquered to pay tribute.

The Spaniards were in awe of the power cacao held for the Aztecs. Díaz observed a banquet where Moctezuma's servants brought him more than fifty jars of the drink, but the chronicler mostly focused on the women who served those jars, for he claimed the drink "was for success with women." Cortés, ever a vigilant warrior, found cacao fascinating for another reason: in a letter to King Charles V of Spain, he described it as "the divine drink, which builds up resistance and fights fatigue. A cup of this precious drink permits man to walk for a whole day without food," alluding to chocolate's naturally occurring caffeine kick. The Spanish priests who came after the Conquest were of mixed opinion: Sahagún thought it "deranges one" in excess but in moderation "it gladdens one, refreshes one, consoles one, invigorates one." Bartolomé de las Casas was more succinct but no less celebratory: "It is very substantial, very cooling, tasty, and agreeable, and does not intoxicate."

Galleons loaded with cacao sailed to Spain's colonial holdings east and west for growing on plantations, introducing the world to an addiction that's never really ceased. "Chocolate on its own, as the ancients used to prepare it, is incredible and healthy," Aguilar says. "But the Spaniards changed it—they added milk and sugar. And then Nestlé and Hershey changed it even more—it's now basically all sugar, and, of course, that's all unhealthy."

He looks at a tray of chocolate nibs—roasted and deshelled but otherwise unprocessed—that an assistant laid out before him; they're small and dark. The nibs smell more like caffeine than anything Western nostrils know as chocolate, and the flavor is somewhere between charcoal and caramelized onions. They're not soft at all—harder than biting through a sunflower seed, and grainy like coffee grounds once

they break down on the tongue. But the zip they possess—nearly electric. Chocolate’s essence seeps into each taste bud; anyone who grabs a couple snack on them until they’re gone.

“I didn’t know what chocolate was until tasting these,” Aguilar said. “And these are just the nibs. When I learned the proper ways, chocolate became incredible.”

Aguilar first encountered the archaic ways of chocolate making while a student at the University of California at Los Angeles in the 1990s. At a party he attended, guests from the Zapotec tribe of southern Mexico brought balls of chocolate paste to prepare for their hosts on a chilly night. The clean tastes and effortless yet intricate preparation, one that hadn’t changed substantially from the Mayas, stunned Aguilar. He was used to Mexican hot chocolate, specifically the Abuelita brand owned by Nestlé that dominates the Mexican hot chocolate market.

“Tasting” the Zapotecs’ chocolate, Aguilar says, speaking in a soft voice that’s nevertheless authoritative, “was like a part of my ancestors suddenly came back from the dead and demanded I not only acknowledge them, but bring them back from obscurity.”

Over the following years, Aguilar tinkered with his own chocolate recipes. Shortly after helping to open Semillas in 2002, Aguilar and his board decided that merely educating children wasn’t enough; they also needed life skills after graduating, and better if it involved their heritage. Xocolatl Café (now closed to the public, unfortunately, but still operating for students and community fund-raisers) tapped into a growing network of Chicano-themed coffee shops in Southern California—Antigua Coffee House in nearby Cypress Park, Tia Chucha’s Café (run by author Luis Rodriguez), and Café Calacas in Santa Ana, nearly all run by first- and second-generation Latinos who were longtime community activists and who wanted the societal trappings of café culture but with a marked political bent.

“Small Latino-Chicano coffeehouses provide the alternative settings versus conglomerates,” says Yancey Quiñones, one of the peo-

ple behind Antigua and an adviser to Xocolatl in its early days. “A space to showcase our culture and to involve community interaction. I also believe it’s an opportunity to have a sustainable business in our neighborhoods and the pathway to Latino entrepreneurial and cultural advantages.”

Part of that commitment for Aguilar, Quiñones, and others also meant going down to southern Mexico and working directly with farmers to source organic chocolate—costlier but necessary. He traveled to Chiapas, to heirloom chocolate farms that development had yet to swallow, farmed by people whose families tilled the land uninterrupted since the heyday of the Maya. But before debuting Xocolatl to the public in December 2009, Aguilar had one constituency he needed to please: Semillas’s students. He had them taste his chocolate, then took them to IHOP to try their hot chocolate. Aguilar still chuckles when remembering the field trip. “One boy said, ‘It tastes like you’re biting into a spoonful of sugar,’” the principal says, of IHOP’s limp effort.

Aguilar also is working with incorporating heirloom vanilla from the Totonacs and plans other culinary projects, all to reacquaint Mexicans with the foods of their ancestors. “The concept of Mexican food is you don’t think of Mexican food as healthy or organic,” he says. “Yet this is the birthplace of chocolate. Chocolate in its purest form *is* healthy. You see the stereotype of Mexicans getting too drunk for parties? It wasn’t like that. Before, our ancestors used chocolate as the beverage of choice during festivities. It was a wonderful thing, and we need to remind people about this.”

Yet such lofty goals face a race against time, economics, and development. Two thirds of the world’s cocoa production is in Africa, with Mexico accounting for less than 2 percent of the industry. Organic cocoa production like what Aguilar favors represents less than half of 1 percent of the world’s total product.⁹ In Mexico’s chocolate-growing regions, the government encourages cacao farmers to chop down their trees and grow soybeans and bananas for the international market, developments that sadden Aguilar.

“As in any trauma, the only thing that will help you survive is resilience,” Aguilar says. “And it’s a testament to the resilience of Mexican food and the culture that it survives. When you look at the chemical properties, chocolate offers resilience. Antioxidants. Theobromine. That’s symbolic. There’s a recovery from that exhaustion. And to do it on our terms is important. Liberation comes through the stomach, it comes through what we eat and how we eat it.”

The principal stops, realizing he’s now sounding much more dogmatic than someone trying to get people to enjoy food needs to sound. Aguilar smiles.

“And on top of that, our Xocolatl is *really* good.”

Mainstream America isn’t ready for Aguilar’s chocolate, truthfully. We’re still too focused on gargantuan meals, belly-stuffers, to care about leaving the chocolate cartel for a boutique variety, even if it’s the original. But there is hope for Aguilar, hope from history: Americans have scoffed at food from Mexico before, only to turn it wholly their own.